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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: INSIDE THE ARMY'S HEARTS AND MINDS CAMPAIGN

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D )

**11.** Summary. (C) In a meeting with poloffs on 1 December, Royal Thai Army (RTA) civil affairs officer Lt. Col. Saniroj Thumayos explained the challenges facing the RTA's attempts to win the hearts and minds of the public in the violent South. Saniroj outlined RTG efforts to train and support Islamic leaders who preach a "correct" form of Islam, detailed previously unknown insurgent insults against the monarchy, and lamented both police corruption and the impatience of national political leaders. When asked about rumors of government elements "disappearing" insurgents, Saniroj stated that Prime Minister Thaksin had clearly forbidden such actions, but that some lower-level officials may not be aware of this policy. Poloffs impressed upon Saniroj our strong concern over any extra-judicial efforts to neutralize insurgents. End Summary.

#### WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS ON THE SMALL SCALE

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**12.** (C) Lt. Col Saniroj Thumayos met with poloffs on 1 December to discuss his recent service as the deputy spokesman for the 4th Army and Southern Provinces Peace Building Command (SPPBC). Saniroj, who is currently assigned to Supreme Command HQ in Bangkok, explained that national level military and political leaders increasingly realize the need for integrated civil affairs components in their efforts to deal with the restive South. Saniroj himself spent much of his time forging links with local officials and leaders and even accompanied security forces on raids and arrests when possible. While these "ride-alongs" allowed him to ease friction with locals, for instance directing raid team members to remove their shoes before entering a house, the civil affairs staff cannot move quickly enough to assist in every operation. Moreover, civil affairs budgets have increased recently, but the SPPBC civil affairs unit remains understaffed.

#### CONTROLLING THE MUSLIM MESSAGE

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**13.** (C) On a larger scale, civil affairs staff in the South have also worked to counter what Saniroj characterized as biased Malaysian and other international Muslim media, to mixed results. The visit of a team from the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was tightly scripted by RTG officials down to every meeting they attended and location visited. The initial readout of their trip provided to the RTG appeared balanced and helpful, but when the OIC team left Thailand, they became harshly critical of RTG policies in the South.

**14.** (C) Saniroj said that a major focus of the civil affairs staff has been the creation of and support to a group of sympathetic Islamic teachers called the Ustaz "Da I." The RTG has "trained" this group of approximately 70 men and paid for them to travel to central Thailand to see how the small Muslim community there lives in unrepressed peace (Note. The majority of Thai Muslims living in central and northern Thailand speak Thai, are not ethnically Malay, and are well integrated into the community. End Note). The Da I are then expected to be active in combating extremist rhetoric and "incorrect" Islamic teaching, mostly through public sermons on Friday nights. That said, the utility of the Da I remains unclear. Many are fearful of reprisals from insurgents for working with the government, but the RTG has not "lost any" yet.

#### CONCERN OVER MUSLIM-BUDDHIST SPLIT

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**15.** (C) The growing split between the Muslim and Buddhist communities clearly concerns Saniroj. He is worried that the exodus of Muslim students from state-run schools means that a generation of Buddhists and Muslims will have grown up without significant contact. Muslim students are drawn to better-funded private Islamic schools with a more rigorous curriculum taught in Yawi, the local dialect. However, Saniroj says that many of these students can barely speak Thai and some cannot even sing the Thai national anthem. For

their part, many Buddhists feel "left behind" by the government and think that authorities do "too much" for the Muslims.

#### THE ROYAL FAMILY AND THE SOUTH

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16. (C) The monarchy remains revered by people of both religions in the South, but insurgents have tried to drive a wedge between them on this issue as well. In a hushed tone, Saniroj explained that last year some insurgents moved from burning Thai flags to torching pictures of the King. Realizing the extreme sensitivity surrounding such a profound insult to the beloved monarch--and the likely violent Buddhist backlash--RTG officials strictly suppressed these reports. Perhaps realizing their error, insurgents soon switched to burning pictures of Thaksin instead.

17. (C) When asked about the frequent travel of Royal Family members to the South, Saniroj explained that this year's trip by the Queen had been uneventful, but that last year, a threatening note saying "this is not your land" had been placed in a gift basket given to her. When the Crown Prince traveled to the three provinces this year, he made a point of driving the length of all three provinces, as opposed to flying in a helicopter. Saniroj explained that this was not intended to highlight the safety of the southern provinces but instead as a naked "show of force" displaying the large number of RTA troops protecting the prince.

#### COPS STILL A PROBLEM

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18. (C) Although Saniroj dutifully explained that military-police cooperation was significantly improved, he began the meeting with an anecdote about a crooked cop in the South turning people against the government through petty corruption. Saniroj also related his repeated frustration over sloppy police methods, saying that police teams would inevitably ruin evidence and/or crime scenes and that very often whichever force got to an incident first, whether police or army, would block the other side from entering. Saniroj quickly snapped back into public relations mode, explaining that cooperation had improved however, "because Thaksin ordered so." After another few rounds of personnel transfers, military-police relations should be settled.

#### TIDBITS ON UNITS, ORGANIZATION

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19. (C) Corrupt police aside, Saniroj admitted that the quality of Army units was uneven as well, especially in regard to their relationship with local communities. Task Force 36, comprised of the 11th Infantry Division from Bangkok was very good, and "feel(s) like family to people." The 5th Infantry regiment, however, was "hated." The creation of the 15th development division earlier this year is good news to Saniroj, who explained that his superiors at the SPPBC saw development as the key to a durable solution.

10. (C) Saniroj also outlined the division of Army forces in the SPPBC area. Currently, each province is home to a task force under the command of the SPPBC and 4th Army. Task Force One in Yala, Task Force Two in Pattani and Task Force Three in Narathiwat. Each task force is divided into three district units of 600 men each. Of these 600, at one time 200 are on training or leave, 200 are on day duty and the remaining 200 are on night duty. This means that there are only 200 soldiers available in each district at any one time, which Saniroj suggested was less than optimal. These task forces would soon be removed from SPPBC control and placed under each provincial governor in a bid to increase local control. When asked if any new deployments or shifts in forces were planned, Saniroj said no and explained that media interest in "escalation" of government forces kept the RTG from moving in more troops and had even slowed or halted normal force rotations, because the Thai media often mischaracterized them as build-ups.

#### LONG TERM SOLUTION NEEDED

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11. (C) RTA leaders believe that the major outbursts of violence will take three years to control, and that life may return to "normal" in the South (i.e. some sporadic violence) in the next decade. Saniroj explained that the military was trying to educate political leaders on these realities but the politicians need more patience. He compared the insurgents to Bangkok teens who race motorcycles, write graffiti and brawl in public. You can't eliminate all of this behavior, but you can limit it to a very small group.

#### NO KNOWLEDGE OF EJKS

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12. (C) When asked about media reports and rumors of

government elements "disappearing" suspected insurgents, Saniroj denied knowledge of any such activity, saying that Thaksin had clearly said "no, no, no, no." Moreover, military policy formally forbade such actions. Saniroj admitted, however, that some lower level officials may not know or understand these orders, but that, in his opinion, such activities are counterproductive and worsen the situation. Poloffs expressed our strong concern about such actions and the potential negative impact on our close and productive bilateral relationship.

BOYCE